

Buddha's teaching of wisdom

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The Government of Lanka says that on Wesak day this year, 2600 years after Buddha will be completed. Of course there are those who dispute the calculations of advisers to the government. In any case it must be approximately true; and after so many years it is worth making an investigation into the fundamental teachings of Buddha. Buddha was probably the first human teacher to reject the idea of God or the Creator. Also, he rejected metaphysics and beliefs in super natural 17-2 phenomena that existed in the religious practices at that time. In particular he rejected the idea of soul and the transmigration of soul towards an eternal life. In opposition to all that he put forward the idea of Dukkha as the fundamental truth of the universe. What is meant by Dukkha? Generally we hear, that Dukkha means suffering of the human subject. In that sense it is a universal truth confined to the human existence. However, what Buddha preached was a universal truth about the whole universe, or the total reality.

What is the objective meaning of dukkha? In the most general sense, dukkha means severe emptiness or negative nothingness. Does that mean continuous negation is the fundamental reality? Buddha often referred to a universal formula to depict the basic character of the reality: anitta- dukkha- anatma, meaning change-negation- lack of soul or substance. However Buddha was eager to explain the idea of dukkha referring to twelve varieties of happenings or movements. Rise and collapse, growth and decay, damage and recovery, unity of the opposite and separation of the equals, pressure and release, disturb and settle. In some places Buddha removed the last two sets and included these within damage and recovery.

In that case there were only eight movements included within dukkha. In spite of such variations dukkha means all such possible severe happenings common to any thing and every thing within the universe. Impermanence, negation in nothingness- dukkha- is at the bottom of every thing. Physical world is a product of this self movement. Buddha said the four physical states, maha bhootha meaning general physical states, patavi or solidness, aapo or liquidness, vayo or gases, and thejo or fire are products of dukkha. In turn all physical things arise from four maha bootha.

Beyond logical empiricism

If understanding of dukkha, as the fundamental character of reality, is the essence of Buddhism, then is it just an intellectual exercise? How is it connected to human ethics and good behavior? As an answer to that Buddha raised the question of human understanding. Our ordinary

understanding is governed by our physical existence. Logical empirical understanding is limited by the day to day experience. This Buddha classified as Anusota Gami -along the flow- knowledge; effortless knowledge. But to realize dukkha one has to go beyond logical empiricism to look at the world through impermanence and negation. Buddha classified this as Patisotha Gami-against the flow- knowledge.

Humans are capable of looking at the world in the latter manner, but our attachment to the physical reality is a hindrance. We are in an alienated condition. Three fold craving, firstly craving for physical existence, tied to the battle for food, sex and rest; secondly craving for the continuation of this life, and thirdly craving for a life after death, keep humans in an alienated state. Mind is over determined by desire suppressing social consciousness and care for others. In such a state of mind one cannot see the reality 'as it is'.

According to Buddha this is the second fundamental truth. However, we can release the hold of craving to establish a blissful state of mind, nirvana, so that care and cooperation over determines the mind. This is the third fundamental truth. In that condition human mind can see beyond the empirical reality to understand the fundamental nature as impermanence, bursting and nothingness. Effortlessly mind would be set to understand this fundamental nature of things. Nirvana is a state of mind that can be achieved by any human through proper practice. It is nothing supernatural or abnormal. It is a mind, full of detachment and objectivity. With such detachment one could understand the reality as a product of changing, bursting, self movement in nothingness. At the same time, detachment from greed leads one to be ever conscious of care for others. Such a state of mind can be achieved only within a cooperative society; and conversely only such consciousness can create a real cooperative society. Buddha described an eight fold path to achieve such a social existence. It will be a conscious wise society, a Sangika society, where all wealth belongs to the society and governed by a democratic decision making process. Buddha classified this eight fold path as the fourth fundamental truth.

Nature of reality

I was always amazed by the wisdom of this man, born in to a society at the dawn of civilization. I amazed, how he arrived at such a modern explanation of the reality, so far back in history. It is a wonder that he traveled thousands of kilometers, preaching and debating, but without much restriction or repression. Not only Buddha, at that time, there were several others with radical views who traveled around explaining their respective ideas. It must have been a democratic, tolerant society eager for knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand it was a society divided according to taboo, traditions and ancestry, where in some areas women were highly discriminated.

However many women joined Buddha to obtain priesthood. Buddha delivered his first sermon at a public park near Vanarasi. In addition to the five monks who listened seated, there were others who have come

for various purposes to the Deer Park. One of them was a Dravidian military general Somawarthan, who was waiting for his friend Sathakiran. Though he listened, as he was impatient, he could not grasp the essence of the sermon. Subsequently, at his friend's place he related what he heard to his friend. A Dravidian girl named Kali overheard that discussion, and she understood dukkha and the nature of reality as explained by Buddha. Out of five monks who listened directly, only one could grasp the essence of Buddha's teaching.

Second to understand four fundamental truths was this girl Kali! It was said that Buddha preached in a language common to most of those who lived in South Asia. Was it a mix of Sanskrit and ancient Dravidian? Was it Maghada Prakrutha?

Though nearly thirty years younger, Heraclites of Greece who taught that change is the only reality, permanence is an illusion and energy is the universal underlying nature, was a contemporary of Buddha. The Greek died at the age of 60 while Buddha died at 80. On that day, after eating a pork preparation Buddha developed a diarrhea.

Not necessarily because of pork. Any way, that was the last meal he took and he died peacefully. About hundred years later in Greece, Socrates was forced to drink poison for exposing the flaws of Athenian democracy and proposing liberal discussion as a way to knowledge. Around 400 years later within the Roman Empire a Jewish person who pronounced that god created humans as a single creed was brutally killed by crucifixion. But, by then world was taken over by exploiters.

P.S.

* 15 may Lakhimanews column.